PERSONAL COMPUTERS

Software Made Less Hard

By T. R. Reid

When last we met in this space, I was emoting enthusiastically about IBM's forceful move into the low-price software business (the IBM Assistant Series), a development which offers firm proof that the age of outrageously priced software is about to end.

The world's biggest computer company deserves credit for taking this pro-consumer step that some major software houses are resisting. But IBM is hardly a pioneer in this business of reasonably priced software.

The days of cheap software date back to that dark era of pre-history—about 1978 or so—when the personal computer was just in its birth throes. Many of the original low-cost software companies, however, were pushed aside by slick new software houses like Lotus that offer highly marketed products at high prices.

One of the early outfits that has survived is a quietly competent, low-budget, minimally advertised operation known as "The Software Toolworks." I have no relationship with this company except that of customer; I've bought several of their programs, all at bargain prices, and have been pleased with every one.

The Software Toolworks was literally founded in a garage (it subsequently moved to a garden shed) by a computer jock named Walt Bilosfky and some friends in 1979. They got into personal computers back in the days when you still had to build your own, and began producing programs to give their computers something to do. They were driven not by profit motive but rather by the sheer joy of writing good code.

These beginnings are reflected today in the two most important attributes of Software Toolworks' programs: they're priced low, and they work well.

Bilosfky's crew started out selling programs for hobbyists who had built their own Heathkit computers, and Heath-Zenith software is still the heart of the line. But now the firm offers most of its big sellers in IBM (MS-DOS) format and it has adapted them for Apple, Kaypro, Epson, DEC, and Xerox 820 machines. The programs are stocked at Computerland and some other stores, but still aren't easy to find.

I noted in this space last fall that Toolworks' "Zencalc" spreadsheet program was an outstanding software bargain, because it could match or beat many of the high-priced spreads at a rock-bottom price. My only complaint was that it lacked a command to sort entries in alphabetical or numeric order. This

spring, Zencalc was replaced by "Mycalc", which is easy to use, fast, and powerful; it now has a SORT function together with a large library of mathematical operations for both business and technical work. It is a great buy at $59.95.

There is no Software Toolworks' word processor as such, but the company offers a pair of programs—the "PIE" editor, at $29.95, the "TEXT" formatter, at $39.95—which together can do the job. PIE, the writing program, is limited and not much use for more than a simple letter. But TEXT is a powerful tool for putting any document into the form you want for printing. It can generate a table of contents or an index and put footnotes in. It has all sorts of interesting gimmicks; for example, if you print on a continuous role of paper, TEXT will print a dashed line between pages to tell you where to rip the sheets apart.

The Toolworks has a $50 spelling checker, SPELL, that works as well as programs costing three times as much. It has some utility programs in the $25 range and a series of excellent games ranging from $20 to $35. It offers a few programming languages, including a "C" compiler ($50), a Z/80 assembler ($30), and a fun implementation of the LISP "artificial intelligence" language ($40).

All of the firm's programs are graced with features that the entire software industry should be required to provide.

For one thing, this company trusts its customers. Its programs are not copy-protected.

Further, the programs come with self-patching instructions so you can change things you don't like. You

Software Toolworks Is a Company on Your Side

can easily speed up or slow down any game, or even re-draw the attacking monsters to make them uglier. If a program has a standard setting you don't like—e.g., which symbols the spelling checker should ignore—you're not stuck forever. You can change it yourself.

The manuals are the most honest in the industry. "SPELL is not perfect," its manual admits. "It has three major limitations." How re-

freshing! Every piece of software, at any price, has limitations, but here is a company secure enough to face up to shortcomings and offer tips on how to deal with them.

While the big, expensive software firms love to charge you an extra $50 or more for templates, supplements, etc., Software Toolworks seems to enjoy throwing them in for free. MyCalc comes with loan and mortgage amortization tables and the federal tax code

built in. The LISP language includes a free version of the famous "ELIZA" program, in which your micro emulates a psychoanalyst.

Of course, if we could just get the rest of the software industry, with its tradition of high prices, lousy manuals, and abysmal support, to emulate the Software Toolworks, we computer addicts wouldn't need a psychoanalyst.

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